

Liberals: 'We've got to be less preachy'; Looking at U.S. divisions, caucus members admit strategy changes needed

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Body

The federal Liberal government maintained an official silence Thursday on the election story unfolding south of the border for a third day running.

But text messages in the governing party caucus are flying, sources said.

Among many Liberals, there was "surprise" and "shock and disappointment" at the tightness of the U.S. race and the entrenchment of an ever more bitter partisan divide despite what pollsters had predicted would be a strong margin of victory for Joe Biden.

At the weekly Liberal caucus meeting Wednesday, the only mention of the U.S. election arose at the beginning, when sources said Prime Minister Justin Trudeau reminded MPs the results were still being tallied and urged them not to offer opinions publicly to avoid thrusting the government into the middle of the debate over a hotly contested election.

Still, Liberal MPs watched the deepened divide among U.S. voters with dismay and looked for political lessons in the Canadian context.

Some cast U.S. politics as driven by "tribal" loyalties. Others saw worrying signs.

"There's a growing 'left behind' cohort in the U.S.," said one MP. "I think that cohort exists in Canada, just maybe not as dominant a strain."

Liberal MPs disagreed on how Canadian policy choices in areas such as climate change or federal spending to stimulate a pandemic-slammed economy might be influenced, not by the final U.S. election result but by desire to avoid a similar partisan entrenchment and a rise of populist sentiment here.

Yet there was agreement that the tone of how politics is done has to change north of the border, as well, and that political actors need to set aside excessive partisanship, drop political slogans and focus on a growing cohort of people who feel "they've been left behind."

Those who spoke to The Star agreed: Demonizing political opponents not only doesn't work, but it actually fuels resentment.

"I think we've got to be a lot less preachy," one MP said, adding every time the government uses a lecturing tone when it talks about "diversity" or using "gender-based analysis" to make decisions, "we lose more voters than we gain."

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All said, the Liberal government has to focus on delivering "practical" solutions to Canadians feeling the same economic anxieties as voters to the south.

Not surprisingly, all argued that is what Trudeau's government is already focused on.

Some MPs believe the climate-change ambitions of the Liberals could be scaled back to pay more attention to preserving working-class jobs, with one flagging that a Biden administration would be hamstrung by a U.S. Senate where a majority will not endorse his aggressive climate action platform.

However, most MPs said the Canadian government needs to act on its clean energy transition promises to ensure workers are not left behind in a competitive environment where American industries as well as state and local governments, are moving much more quickly than Washington to address climate change.

"So the lesson I would get out of the United States is we should not be dismissive of others' views," one MP said, "because that makes people ... stop listening to you."

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